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The Dimensions of Irish Government Involvement in the Pursuit of a Settlement of the Northern Ireland Conflict

SUSAN McDERMOTT

ABSTRACT *The role of the Irish government changed significantly throughout the course of the conflict in Northern Ireland. During the early years the Irish government defined a core policy position but struggled to find a role that would involve it in the settlement of the conflict. The Irish role in the pursuit of a settlement increased in the aftermath of the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the later development of a peace process. This led to a gradual evolution of Irish policy as the new intergovernmental role was developed and the Irish government shifted its approach towards increased dialogue and discussion with nationalists and republicans, while maintaining the central importance of the intergovernmental relationship. The different dimensions of Irish government involvement, including its core policy, the role of political leaders, party dynamics and the role of civil servants and diplomats, are all under analysis to explain how the Irish government contributed to the settlement of the Northern Ireland conflict.*

Keywords: Irish government; political parties; intergovernmentalism; Northern Ireland; conflict; settlement

Introduction

The Good Friday Agreement has been described by one Irish policymaker as ‘an evolution, not a revolution’.¹ From the perspective of the Irish government, the 1998 Belfast Agreement was not a revolutionary change of policy; rather, it was based on the evolution of a policy process from the early 1970s. The Good Friday Agreement was the culmination of a lengthy intergovernmental process and multi-party talks. The three-strand composition of the agreement shows the complex nature of the negotiating process while also clearly displaying how the process was managed between the interested parties. As is well known, strand one focused on

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the internal political settlement within Northern Ireland and the foundation of consociational structures. Strand two added a North–South structure and strand three continued and advanced the principle of an institutional British–Irish process by adding new structures and improving existing ones. Strand three represents the importance of the intergovernmental relationship as a driving force behind the peace process and the achievement of the Good Friday Agreement. This article argues that there was a continuity of certain central aspects of Irish government policy and examines the reasons behind the evolution of this policy. Similarities and differences in the approach of the main Irish political parties on the Northern Ireland issue were a major factor in policy continuity and change.

Developing Policy

The irredentist policy towards Northern Ireland articulated by Irish governments from the 1920s meant that there was minimal political contact between the two jurisdictions. From the creation of the Free State in 1922, the two parts of the island grew increasingly apart and the 1925 settlement in the wake of the Boundary Commission finalised the separation. The Lemass–O’Neill meetings were an important turning point in this relationship, but they happened in 1965 and coincided with the emergence of a dissenting unionist voice, associated in particular with Rev. Ian Paisley. Subsequent years witnessed increasing street violence in Northern Ireland, so the possibility of developing a healthy North–South relationship did not emerge before the outbreak of large-scale violence at the end of the 1960s. The Irish government was, therefore, ill prepared to respond to the Northern Ireland conflict as it emerged. At this point there was no clearly defined state policy beyond the irredentist claims articulated in Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution. Government policy prior to the conflict has been described as a ‘convenient fiction of commitment to a united Ireland and a practical absence of any effort to achieve it’ (Morrow, 1995: 144). The government had produced limited policy research relating to Northern Ireland, a gap that Kelly (2013: 1) attributes to a ‘sustained reluctance within Fianna Fáil to deal with the political realities of a divided Ireland’. Any research that did exist was politically anti-partitionist. For example, the Committee of the Mansion House All-party Anti-partition Conference, founded in the late 1940s to discuss partition, produced policy recommendations that sought to undermine partition. However, the temporary rise in the intellectual and political examination of partition in the late 1940s and 1950s cannot be proven to have influenced government thinking and it was not relevant to the Irish government when grappling with a policy position in 1968–1969 (McDermott, 2012: 78–79). As Basil Chubb argued in the *Irish Press* in May 1969, ‘the issue was now Civil Rights’ and ‘most northern Catholics saw themselves as belonging to Northern Ireland for better or for worse, and that anti-partitionism was window-dressing nonsense, pathetically irrelevant and fast disappearing’ (Mansergh, 2003: 394).

In 1969 the immediate priority of the Irish government was to prevent the violence from spreading south and to avoid doing anything that would lead to an escalation of

the situation. At this point, there was arguably little policy difference between the three main parties, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Labour Party. The political parties were simply reacting to events as they unfolded, establishing new contacts and relations with nationalists in the North, and acting on the basis of advice and information from such nationalists, many of whom went on to found the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). At government level, the Taoiseach took ultimate responsibility for Northern Ireland affairs and a small section was created within the Department of the Taoiseach to deal with Northern Ireland issues. The Department of External (later, Foreign) Affairs already had a small section that had previously been writing anti-partition speeches for international audiences, but was now enlarged to deal with the growing crisis in Northern Ireland; this section later became the Anglo-Irish division. In the early 1970s an Inter-Departmental Unit (IDU) was created to deal with Northern Ireland and to focus on policy formation.

To simplify, the aims of the Irish state in the early 1970s seem to have been, first, the protection of the security of the Irish state, second, the protection and representation of the nationalist interest in Northern Ireland, and, finally, the longer-term objective of a united Ireland, alongside the short-term objective of increased cross-border cooperation.

These policies were central and remained constant throughout the course of the conflict, but along with these policies a core strategy was formed. From the early 1970s the Irish government realised that to advance its policies at any level it needed to be consulted by the British government, which had full responsibility for Northern Ireland following the introduction of direct rule in 1972. This core policy and the objective of consultation with the British were pursued differently and evolved at different points in the conflict, but they remained constant, regardless of diplomatic and political influence. The Sunningdale Agreement of 1973 established a *de facto*, albeit short-lived, process whereby the Irish government would be involved, consulted, and have a legitimate role to play in the attempts to create peace in Northern Ireland. However, during the four years prior to this Agreement the British government was resistant to the idea that the Irish government had any right to be consulted on Northern Ireland policy, or that it had any legitimate right to interfere in matters relating to Northern Ireland. The British government at this point was emphasising its exclusive sovereignty, and was therefore unwilling to listen to Irish government views, however relevant (Mansergh, 2003: 398–400). This situation was exacerbated when the Irish government brought its case to the United Nations in 1969. This was not a successful diplomatic initiative, but it did put pressure on the British government to listen to the Irish government, and to accept its right to put forward views and be consulted. By 1972, the British government was prepared to confer with the Irish government on a range of issues, particularly on the White Paper that led to the Northern Ireland Assembly Bill, which preceded the Sunningdale Agreement and was a key part of the settlement. British government consultation with the Irish government was the achievement of the core Irish strategy of the time, and it ensured that northern nationalist interests, represented by the Irish government, were heard.

This process of consultation between the two governments was not institutionalised as part of the Sunningdale Agreement, nor did it create a strong diplomatic link between British and Irish officials. The link was still dependent largely on the party political leaders of the day and could be easily weakened by events in Northern Ireland. The collapse of the Sunningdale Agreement certainly proves how tenuous this consultative link was. Irish officials from the time described the existence of a policy vacuum on their side in the aftermath of Sunningdale.² The policy vacuum and lost confidence refer directly to the end of the intergovernmental approach that had created Sunningdale. By the late 1970s British–Irish relations were at their lowest ebb, and in the absence of an intergovernmental process the Irish officials were resigned to being onlookers and protectors of their own interests (McDermott, 2012: 137). They had their core policy, but one Department of Foreign Affairs official emphasised that they did not have an agenda; they were not trying to exploit events in the North to pursue unity.³ Instead the Irish government focused on security and the law and order policies aimed at preventing violence spilling over the border. Another Department of Foreign Affairs official described the position in the 1970s as ‘reacting to developments and trying to contain them’. This reactive policy was due to a feeling within the department in the mid-1970s that the South was at risk of major instability.⁴

Another possible reason for this policy vacuum might be that the Irish government was trying to understand the lessons from the failure of the Sunningdale experience that could help them with future policy development. Interviews with Irish officials reveal that many of the Irish diplomats and civil servants were acutely aware that the Council of Ireland was one of the main factors in the failure of the Sunningdale Agreement, and academic analysis has subsequently endorsed this view. The Council of Ireland proposal was significant for the development of the Irish government’s relationship with nationalists in Northern Ireland, particularly those in the SDLP. During 1973 the Department of Foreign Affairs began to research and examine the practicalities and legalities of the Council of Ireland concept,⁵ to show their commitment to ‘a common cause with the SDLP’, as the SDLP had been calling for a meaningful Irish dimension for some time (McGrattan, 2009: 66). The Irish government appeared to be optimistic and ambitious about the Council of Ireland prior to Sunningdale, but in the aftermath of the Agreement its fate became one of the most important lessons learned by Irish policymakers and a central issue for future re-evaluation (Craig, 2010: 180). Protecting and representing nationalist interests was still central to Irish policy formation; an ‘Irish dimension’ was a key element in Irish government strategy but it would need to be treated more carefully in North–South policy proposals. The Council of Ireland proposed at Sunningdale included a Council of Ministers and a North–South consultative assembly. While the Irish government realised that it had pressed its case too far, it also realised that it could not assert its objective of representing nationalist interests and approaching the British regarding nationalist concerns unless an easier process existed. If an institutional change, such as a Council of Ireland-type structure, was not possible in the short term, then some kind of political or diplomatic change was necessary (McDermott, 2012: 86).

Party Politics

The lessons learned by the Irish government after Sunningdale were a driving force behind its policy in the late 1970s. Relations with the British were quite mixed during the 1970s. Without an institutional structure or a solid intergovernmental agreement, the relationship often suffered from episodes of sourness at a diplomatic level, but by the end of the decade some progress had been made and the methods and degree of contact gradually improved. Meetings at EEC level provided a new arena for the two governments to interact, and this played a role in maintaining contact during these turbulent years. Arguably, for the Irish government the lessons from Sunningdale highlighted different ways that its core policies could be pursued and possibly achieved. However, for a policy change to take place it needs to be pushed by political leadership, and one of the major benefits of the change in Irish political leadership during the early 1980s was that both Haughey and FitzGerald drove the policy process but handed over important responsibility to civil servants and diplomats. This increased responsibility meant that during the political instability of the early 1980s there was continuity within the process at official or civil service level, but not at political level.

The influence of political change in the South on Northern Ireland policy was not simply related to the differing ideological approaches of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, and how the two main political parties were driven by their party ideology or constrained by it. The role of political competition in Ireland meant that the conflict, at times, became like any other political issue and had the potential to be used for political advantage. Northern Ireland was not a significant electoral issue in the South but the electorate still demanded a coherent and competent policy position and expected the government to respond appropriately to day-to-day events in order to prevent any overspill of violence (O'Donnell, 2009: 219). Analysing the ideological differences between the parties on specific issues relating to resolving the conflict, such as the interpretation of the principle of consent, is important, but they alone do not explain the influence that political leadership and party politics had on the Irish government position during the conflict. There were often important political factors at play too.

O'Donnell (2007b) argues that the existence of bipartisanship during the 1970s was a myth; while it may have appeared to exist in 1974, when Fianna Fáil did not outwardly criticise the Sunningdale Agreement, the collapse of the Executive and the Sunningdale experiment meant that a potentially divisive debate was avoided in Dáil Éireann and within the wider political discourse in the South. Ivory (1999: 89–90) elaborates on the differences between the two main political parties in the 1970s, particularly in relation to self-determination and consent. While some in Fianna Fáil, including Lynch, agreed with the Fine Gael and Labour principle of consent (the consent of a majority of the population within Northern Ireland to the unity of Ireland), others within Fianna Fáil, including Charles Haughey, were much more ambiguous on this concept. Some would argue that the principle of consent would require a majority on the island, thereby reducing the unionist

population to the status of a national minority; others would argue that the decision was a matter for the British government only and therefore the unionist population had no right to be consulted. Another point made by Ivory (1999), and again by O'Donnell (2009), is that Fianna Fáil was much more interested in the concept of self-determination, whereas Fine Gael became focused on the principle of consent. This difference became more relevant later, when the Joint Declaration of the British and Irish governments at Downing Street in 1993 incorporated these two concepts: self-determination, and the idea of mutual consent between North and South. This declaration eliminated the nuanced policy difference between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael.

The Fine Gael–Labour coalition (1973–1977) focused on security-related issues as conflict intensified following the collapse of Sunningdale. If party ideologies are examined, Fine Gael's emphasis on security could be attributed to its reputation for being tough on law and order (this reputation stems from the *Cumann na nGaedheal* legacy in the early days of state-building and civil war politics), but as mentioned earlier this emphasis on security was not being driven primarily by party ideology, as government officials mention the real threat towards the state that was felt at the time. Security measures such as offences against the state legislation, specialised units within the Gardaí and the introduction of Section 31 of the Broadcasting Act (which deprived members of Sinn Féin and the IRA access to the media) were in direct response to the IRA campaign in the North, and were aimed at protecting the South from an overspill of violence that might cause instability in the state. The implementation of such a policy cannot be attributed singularly to party political ideology. It was a combination of responding to events, intelligence from Foreign Affairs officials and the ideological background of many in cabinet, which helped to ease the introduction of tough security measures. However, one Fine Gael politician from the time has described how the coalition felt constrained by the republican positions held by Fianna Fáil. Lynch, as leader of the party, maintained a sense of moderation on Northern Ireland policy and determined Northern Ireland policy; however, there was a faction within the party that was much more committed to traditional republican values. Stephen Kelly (2013: 5) outlines how, when conflict broke out in Northern Ireland in 1969, a division appeared in Fianna Fáil between those who maintained that only constitutional means could undo partition and those who advocated the use of physical force as a legitimate policy. Lynch managed to maintain a sense of moderation in Fianna Fáil throughout his leadership, but a strongly anti-partition faction remained in the party. Fianna Fáil was still the largest political party in Ireland and because it represented a large portion of the Irish electorate, the Fine Gael–Labour coalition was not willing or able to introduce measures to which Fianna Fáil was strongly opposed for fear of a major backlash. Extradition, for example, was a very important issue for the British government and was a policy that Fine Gael was willing to implement in the 1970s; as one senior Fine Gael representative explained, 'I think we would have done so had Fianna Fáil's attitude been different'.⁶

By the late 1970s both Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil were under new leadership, with Garret FitzGerald and Charles Haughey, respectively, at the helm. Both leaders were

conscious of the need to shore up the middle ground in Northern Ireland but had very different approaches towards doing so, as can be seen throughout the 1980s. Fine Gael ‘concentrated on securing participation for nationalists at a political level in Northern Ireland together with a strong Irish dimension’, a priority that motivated both the New Ireland Forum and the Anglo-Irish Agreement. On the other hand, Fianna Fáil under Haughey ‘offered republican language as a political alternative to the IRA’ (O’Donnell, 2009: 209).

As Taoiseach, Haughey was no longer able to appear ambiguous on the issue of physical force as he had done within the anti-partition faction of Fianna Fáil throughout the 1970s. As Taoiseach, he had to denounce unambiguously republican violence, while at the same time appearing favourable to his republican support base by protecting Articles 2 and 3 and being ambiguous on his interpretation of the consent principle. FitzGerald interpreted Haughey’s changing stance while in government and opposition (1981–1982) as being symptomatic of his lack of understanding of Northern Ireland. Haughey was described by some as having ‘had the same delusions that McBride had – that [Northern Ireland] was a defense used by Britain and they weren’t going to give it back’.⁷ FitzGerald, on the other hand, believed that owing to his own family background he inherently understood Northern Ireland (FitzGerald, 1991).

The New Ireland Forum was founded in 1983 and may have been motivated by FitzGerald’s desire to shore up moderate nationalist support and to alienate Sinn Féin. This Forum for political parties to discuss Northern Ireland and a possible solution was also an attempt to stabilise Irish government policy through discussion of the nationalist approach. The three possible constitutional mechanisms that were promoted in the New Ireland Forum report – a unitary state, a federal state and joint authority – reflected the divergence of opinion within nationalist Ireland on what form a settlement might take. One senior politician argues that the Forum was an important part of the process, but he felt that people in the South ‘had to get over this fourth green field and this very nationalist view, which we all were brought up with’.⁸ Haughey was on the other end of the spectrum and held his line throughout that unity had to be prioritised, and he used ambiguous language about his interpretation of consent. Haughey was in a precarious position while in opposition from 1982 to 1987. The New Ireland Forum and the improved relationship with Britain appeared to be working, and Garret FitzGerald’s policy on Northern Ireland was gaining momentum. This put Haughey under political pressure; he was in danger of being out-manoeuvred in terms of credibility on Northern Ireland by Garret FitzGerald, but still remained in danger of being outflanked by the republican side of his own party (O’Donnell, 2007a: 114).

Developing the Intergovernmental Process

The political manoeuvres mentioned above identify one of the factors that determined the direction of Irish government policy from the late 1970s and early 1980s. Economic crisis and political instability during the 1980s had the potential effect of

destabilising the government's Northern Ireland policy. This led to the increased importance of civil service policymakers to provide continuity. These were turbulent and tense years within the conflict and within Irish politics due to economic crisis, but the early 1980s witnessed a dramatic improvement in Anglo-Irish relations.

Evidence from interviews with officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Department of Justice indicates that Irish officials tried to learn lessons from the collapse of the Sunningdale Agreement about how to further the core policies of the state and expand their scope both on the ground in Northern Ireland and with the British government. Interview material also indicates that one of the important lessons was that the 'Irish dimension' was not feasible through a Council of Ireland structure. Arguments in favour of a Council of Ireland proposal remained constant: northern nationalists wanted institutional recognition of their Irish identity and the Irish government wanted to have their right to consultation institutionalised. However, there was a shift in strategy, which motivated the Irish to seek a stronger intergovernmental process with the British government. This coincided with a period of warming diplomatic relations that was important to the pursuit of this strategy, and a period of political change in Ireland that brought into play a range of differing political factors.

Haughey can be credited with beginning the process at the May 1980 Anglo-Irish summit, which involved discussions on Northern Ireland between him and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. The summit was not of substantive importance to the process as nothing was achieved, but it was symbolic of improved relations and a new policy direction. The second Anglo-Irish summit in December 1980 led to the commissioning of joint Anglo-Irish studies covering a range of issues of common concern, kicking off an intergovernmental process (Tonge, 2002: 123). Thatcher did not have an easy relationship with either Haughey or FitzGerald, and was tense with Haughey.⁹ Nevertheless, the 1981 Anglo-Irish summit agreed to regular meetings to look at practical areas of cooperation through an Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Council.

The fact that British officials were ready to cooperate with the Irish government was a crucially important factor in the negotiations that began in 1983. When Garret FitzGerald became Taoiseach again in late 1982, the political and diplomatic factors were all in place to drive forward intergovernmental negotiations. The structures for negotiations were established, civil service resources on both sides were dedicated and, importantly, the negotiators were determined to find the right balance for their leaders, who had political factors to consider. One unusual aspect of this process was the effort that was put into building a solid base around the negotiating structures. Irish officials in London made an enormous effort to make contact with British politicians to build credibility and construct 'a sense of the importance of understanding the nature of the issue', a process that later became known as 'dining for Ireland'.¹⁰ This also involved emphasising the seriousness of the Irish position to those who were not interested in allowing a role for the Irish government in the British approach to Northern Ireland. The line that was pushed from the Irish side was that 'it was about the stability of our state and it was insecurity in the UK that was spilling over and threatening the security of our country'.¹¹

Domestically, the New Ireland Forum was still continuing, and it had an important role in unifying Irish nationalists and developing a consensus. This was symbolic of the wider policy aim that the Fine Gael–Labour coalition held at the onset of inter-governmental negotiations: to find an institutional arrangement that would appeal to nationalists in Northern Ireland and prevent further transfer of support from the moderate SDLP to the militant republicanism of Sinn Féin/IRA. The New Ireland Forum might not have created the consensus that FitzGerald had hoped for on its launch, but through an appearance of shared ideas and dialogue it managed to create a space from which Irish officials could exert greater pressure on the British government towards an intergovernmental agreement. This was done in response to Margaret Thatcher's dismissive 'out, out, out' speech,¹² which rejected the three options produced within the New Ireland Forum report: a unitary state, a federal state and joint authority. The Irish government turned the 'out, out, out' speech to its advantage, explaining to British officials that the speech had exacerbated an already difficult situation. This gave the Irish government the opportunity to explain the importance of an intergovernmental agreement for its attempts to prevent the electoral rise of Sinn Féin, through proving that constitutional nationalism was still a valid aspiration. Thatcher's words may have had important strategic value when viewed with hindsight, but many of those interviewed describe the devastating impact it had on Irish morale at the time.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 institutionalised the Irish government's consultative role through the creation of the Intergovernmental Conference. This included a permanent secretariat at Maryfield, near Belfast, which gave Irish officials a role in policymaking and consultation and, although there were no decision-making powers, it did create a channel for the Irish government to raise important internal Northern Irish matters with the British. This not only created a mechanism through which the Irish government could represent nationalists on the ground in Northern Ireland, but also represented an expansion of the diplomatic capabilities of the Irish state (even though this was quite difficult in the years immediately after the Agreement, as security risks were high).

As the Agreement was between two governments and no other parties, unlike the Sunningdale and Good Friday Agreements, the two countries became tied together through the process of negotiation and signing the Agreement. Even the level of anger and protest from unionists and republicans against the Agreement could not damage the permanency of the new intergovernmental relationship, which was not only policy-driven but also held together by political will within both the British and Irish governments. Irish officials and policymakers seemed acutely aware that institutional change must be incremental, and the significance of the Anglo-Irish Agreement was that the institutional framework allowed 'new relationships to develop and activities to be taken forward'.¹³ The Anglo-Irish division within the Department of Foreign Affairs was greatly expanded in the aftermath of the Anglo-Irish Agreement to coordinate the new structures and to allow this new space for diplomatic relationships to emerge and develop (Delaney, 2001: 286).

The Anglo-Irish Agreement committed the Irish government to its core policy of representing the nationalist community in Northern Ireland, and the Maryfield

Secretariat and Intergovernmental Conference made that process easier. The remit of the Intergovernmental Conference allowed the Irish government to put forward proposals and views as to how devolution could be brought about in Northern Ireland, while at all times considering the interests of the nationalist community there.¹⁴ Issues that were defined as relating to the nationalist interest included human rights, fair employment, equal opportunities, and other areas. The Intergovernmental Conference also allowed for the discussion of these important matters to take place in private, allowing the governments to build up a relationship of trust.¹⁵ Disagreements no longer risked becoming public information, unlike the tense public diplomacy of the 1970s.

Pan-nationalism

The Maryfield Secretariat allowed for Department of Foreign Affairs officials to influence policy, improve intelligence and form new relationships and understandings of the problems in Northern Ireland. It allowed the Irish government to gather information and to attempt to build confidence in Irish motives among unionists (though it was still too early for Irish officials to form trustful relationships with the disgruntled unionists). Matters were stable and continuous at official level; however, the new Fianna Fáil government in 1987 initiated an expansion of policy. The core policy position of representing nationalists in the North was extended to include republicans. This did not take place immediately, but in 1988 Haughey was moving gradually towards involving republicans in the process, even though this remained secret until five years later. This is where the contrast between political and diplomatic policy is evident. As Fianna Fáil began to pursue a new direction, Irish diplomats at the official level continued to have no contact or association with Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, the Hume–Adams talks in 1988 reintroduced the issue of national self-determination into political discourse for debate and discussion, allowing Fianna Fáil to focus on defining its own version of the consent principle through this public debate (Ivory, 1999: 94). According to O'Donnell (2007b: 67–68), the Hume–Adams talks gave Fianna Fáil the opportunity to transcend the 1985 Agreement.

The policy shift in the late 1970s and early 1980s towards an Anglo-Irish process and institutional structures had significant long-term benefits, one of which was that relationships prospered at the top political level and at civil service level. There was a positive, collaborative interest in bringing about peace in Northern Ireland, and although the Anglo-Irish Agreement was not the solution it could help to provide an institutional framework for the two governments. Mallie and McKittrick (1996: 35–41) identify the Anglo-Irish Agreement as a starting point of the peace process. Owing to the strengthening of the intergovernmental relationship by the Agreement, Darby and McGinty (2008: 21) argue that the relationship would now be able to support a peace process and the strains that that would entail. However, when explaining the peace process and analysing the Irish role in the emergence of the peace process, O'Donnell (2007c: 225) warns against an over-concentration on

the Anglo-Irish Agreement and overlooking the relationship between Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin, which lay at the core of the process. The Anglo-Irish Agreement led to strong reactions on the part of both unionists and republicans. Arguably this could have led to a shift in strategy for both groups. Sinn Féin began to enter into dialogue with John Hume, while other secret contacts were made between Sinn Féin and Fianna Fáil representatives. This process of increased dialogue on the Irish nationalist and republican side has been referred to as a pan-nationalist alliance or front.¹⁶ Murray and Tonge (2005: 151) argue that it would be an exaggeration to claim that the Anglo-Irish Agreement created a pan-nationalist alliance as changes were already taking place within Sinn Féin, including discussion of the policy of abstention from the Northern Ireland Assembly. However, they argue that the 'Agreement hastened the process by which Sinn Féin would abandon its political isolation ... it needed to seek common cause with the remainder of nationalist Ireland and ultimately [it] made Sinn Féin tactically astute in the development of political allies'. The use of the term pan-nationalism throughout this article develops this argument made by Murray and Tonge (2005): it refers to the evolution of a closer strategic relationship between Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin and the SDLP in the pursuit of a settlement in Northern Ireland. Pan-nationalism was a process or relationship that developed slowly and the term does not imply that the parties agreed on everything.

The pan-nationalist talks existed in secret until the early 1990s, and were therefore happening alongside the continued prospering of the intergovernmental relationship. Reynolds inherited Haughey's government in 1992 and with it his Northern Ireland policy. He did not prioritise the Anglo-Irish relationship in the way that previous leaders had done. The idea of a possible joint declaration had first come up between Major and Haughey at a meeting in December 1991, and even though he was also pursuing a pan-nationalist path Reynolds took up the initiative with huge enthusiasm (Powell, 2009: 74). This new pan-nationalist path created an alternative approach to the intergovernmental path but one that did not undermine it (McDermott, 2012: 173). Reynolds was not just willing to include Sinn Féin in discussions; he worked tirelessly to create the conditions to make it possible, and managed to balance the need to consult Hume and Adams, yet strongly represented the Irish government position, and not Hume and Adams, in discussions with the British.¹⁷ The core Irish policies underwent a shift in emphasis under Reynolds; Haughey may have started the process in secret but it was under the leadership of Reynolds that it became public. Reynolds drove forward the intergovernmental process and developed a strong personal relationship with John Major, managing to do this while also putting a new emphasis and importance on the development of the nationalist relationship.

It is arguable that the peace process that began under the leadership of Reynolds could not have happened under a Fine Gael government; while the main parties might have agreed on core policy there was still a difference in strategy and approach to the issue. Fine Gael was determined in the 1980s to prevent the electoral rise of Sinn Féin and, as mentioned above, the Anglo-Irish Agreement was motivated by the desire to undermine Sinn Féin ideology and to promote SDLP nationalism.

Fine Gael's emphasis on intergovernmentalism and its definition of consent as referring to a majority of the population in Northern Ireland did not appeal to Sinn Féin, whereas Fianna Fáil's stance on Articles 2 and 3, its ambiguity on consent and its opposition to the Anglo-Irish Agreement put Fianna Fáil in an easier position to begin dialogue with republicans. This dialogue marked a crucial policy shift on the part of the Irish government; importantly, after a bleak decade of hostility towards the direction of Irish government policy, Fianna Fáil was now driving policy in a new pan-nationalist way, while the institutions and trust that had been built up under the Anglo-Irish process continued to fulfil their function. The significance of this policy shift may have been disguised by the fact that Fine Gael claimed the peace process as a continuation of its approach to Northern Ireland (O'Donnell, 2009: 208). The determination of Fine Gael to view government policy in a straight line and not to analyse interparty differences was beneficial to the process following a change of government in 1994, even though the personalities involved in this change had a substantial impact.

The negotiations for a joint declaration were very different from those prior to Sunningdale and the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The Anglo-Irish Agreement was driven by a series of meetings between Irish negotiator Dermot Nally and British negotiator Robert Armstrong, with wider teams including Michael Lillis, from the Department of Foreign Affairs, Thatcher's advisor, David Goodall, and other diplomats. This was capped by meetings at prime-ministerial and foreign minister level. The negotiation of the Downing Street Declaration came about through swapping a long line of drafts that would result in a joint declaration at the end of 1993.¹⁸ There was a Hume–Adams draft, which the British argued was unusable as unionists would consider it 'tainted by its origin', but they also claimed never to have received a copy of it.¹⁹ The British prepared a draft that was unpalatable to the pan-nationalist position; then the Irish government developed its own draft and was adamant that it would negotiate only on the basis of this text. Major eventually agreed that there was enough in that draft to work with, but not before Reynolds had removed the objectionable republican elements.

The Downing Street Declaration was important in Irish government policy terms as it incorporated the principles that mattered to the wider nationalist and republican base. This demonstrated that any future process would be a more inclusive one, and both Irish and British governments committed to this under the joint declaration in 1993. This joint declaration was a vital part of the intergovernmental process showing that the British and Irish governments were on the same page.²⁰ By officially denying a selfish strategic or economic interest, 'the British government provided ideological foundations for a purely political and democratic approach' to solving the conflict (Mansergh 2003: 57).

Towards the Good Friday Agreement

The Downing Street Declaration moved Irish government policy in a new direction: the concept of self-determination incorporated the combined Fianna Fáil and Sinn

Féin ideology into the mainstream, and the institutional structures and Anglo-Irish process remained as important as before (Ivory, 1999: 209). The Downing Street Declaration did not override the Anglo-Irish Agreement; it added an important dimension to government policy. The British and Irish governments were agreed on the principle of consent as being on the basis of 'consent, freely and concurrently given, North and South, to bring about a united Ireland, if that is their wish'.²¹ While party politics was central to bringing this about, the importance of cross-party Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour support was central to the credibility of the Irish side in its support for progress in Northern Ireland.

Shortly after the Downing Street Declaration, the Fianna Fáil–Labour government fell, and the role of the Irish government within the peace process faced a major challenge. The change in government involved a John Bruton-led 'Rainbow' coalition including Fine Gael, Labour and the Democratic Left. Many of the Irish officials who were working in Maryfield or involved through the Anglo-Irish division with the Intergovernmental Conference or with other aspects of the peace process have recounted the change in dynamic that occurred when John Bruton became Taoiseach. Unlike the aftermath of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, when Fianna Fáil was influenced by political considerations (being outflanked in their republicanism by Sinn Féin), Bruton did not have any strong political considerations affecting his approach to Northern Ireland. His party was much more conservative than Fianna Fáil when it came to dealing with republicans, and overall the Fine Gael party did not have as many frontbench politicians with strong views on Northern Ireland as could be found in Fianna Fáil. The Irish electorate was largely in favour of the peace process. In order to continue the process, Fine Gael disguised the fact that it was a change from the party's previous stance while in opposition through claiming it as a continuity and extension of its policy, and argued that the Downing Street Declaration ensured that Bruton was tied to the policy bequeathed to him – he had no choice but to continue along its path. Bruton claimed that he did not disagree with the Downing Street Declaration but he wanted to add his own views to the policy.²² Haughey had been driven by republican ideology and political pragmatism in the late 1980s; Bruton, on the other hand, appears to have been driven by a more conservative or anti-republican ideology.

Bruton's ideology was different not only from Fianna Fáil leaders but also from the Fine Gael leaders that had preceded him. He not only had criticisms of previous Fine Gael policy, but also a deep distrust for republicans and their inclusion in the peace process. Former Fine Gael leader Alan Dukes describes him as being 'from a different mindset'. Nevertheless, he maintains that Bruton could 'identify the importance of the process to get a concrete and realistic relationship between the communities'.²³ Part of the problem with Bruton wanting to add his own views to existing policy was that his main criticism of Irish government policy was based on a reaction against one of the core policy positions outlined above. He believed that the Irish government approach to negotiating on behalf of nationalists was a flawed approach; he argued that the ultimate aim of a united Ireland should mean that the Irish government takes an equal interest in all the people in Ireland, 'whether they have a British allegiance or a Nationalist

allegiance'.²⁴ For this reason Bruton did not accept the idea of pan-nationalism and he preferred to focus more on the intergovernmental process.

Bruton's ideology and approach had an impact on the politics of the time, but did not have an impact on core government policy. When Bruton took over, the Framework Documents – which outlined a shared understanding for future negotiations with Northern Irish parties – were already being discussed with Major and the British government. Unlike the political impetus behind the Anglo-Irish Agreement and Downing Street Declaration, the Framework Documents happened in spite of Bruton, rather than because of Bruton. They were negotiated mainly between the Department of Foreign Affairs and British officials. A Department of Foreign Affairs official remembered the distrust that Bruton had for the department; the feeling at the time was that Bruton was suspicious that many of those in Foreign Affairs had a republican bias.²⁵ There was growing hostility within the department towards Bruton. One diplomat specifically refers to the increased diplomatic attention that was needed on the ground in Northern Ireland – dealing with the SDLP, Sinn Féin and the British, and trying to maintain a continuity of approach at all levels, to counteract the potential political damage. This civil service role, institutionally and through diplomatic contacts, was important for ensuring momentum in the process. The coalition dynamics were another important influence in maintaining stability at the time. Dick Spring, as Minister for Foreign Affairs and Tánaiste, became very active in the process at this stage, and found that part of this role was to maintain a direct link to previous policy; whereas his role in the past had been to bring Reynolds back towards the centre from a republican extreme, he played the opposite role with Bruton.²⁶

The Department of Foreign Affairs viewed the role of the Framework Documents as tactical, designed to keep Sinn Féin in the process and maintain a ceasefire.²⁷ John Bruton was well-briefed by officials from the department about this tactical role but he disagreed ideologically and questioned the relevance of following this strategy.²⁸ However, through accepting and working with the policy they inherited, the parties in the Rainbow coalition accepted the parameters for any subsequent multiparty negotiations. As Ivory (1999: 93–100) describes it, these parameters emerged over 'several, often acrimonious, years', irrespective of which party was actually in office, and it reflected the subtle reworking of the basic principles of Irish state policy. The Framework Documents also incorporated another important reworking of the term 'Irish dimension' that was used in the 1970s – in other words, the direct involvement of the Irish government in Northern Irish affairs. The intergovernmental relationship that developed in the 1980s was one aspect of this, but the Council of Ireland proposal also had a North–South dimension, and this dimension remained a priority for the Irish government and for nationalists in the North. The North–South considerations were approached from a less ideological stance than they had been around the time of Sunningdale, and were now viewed from a more practical viewpoint: 'we wanted to have meaningful North–South bodies, which would actually make a difference to people's lives, and would have a certain political value'.²⁹

Although multiparty talks began in 1996, it was not until the second IRA ceasefire in 1997 that the path towards an agreement emerged. This ceasefire also coincided with a change in government in Ireland, when Fianna Fáil, under Bertie Ahern, formed a government with the Progressive Democrats. Among other timing factors, this change of government was significant for Sinn Féin, as republicans had found it difficult to deal with Bruton, whereas they knew that Bertie Ahern was more eager to advance their role in the political process. Prior to the change in government, the Department of Foreign Affairs talks team had drawn up 20 or so position papers, covering every aspect that would arise during the negotiations. The department briefings may have had a role in moving Fianna Fáil forward on the issue of Articles 2 and 3 of the constitution, but this was something the party was discussing internally throughout the conflict and peace process. It was also an issue that Fine Gael felt needed to be negotiated by Fianna Fáil, and put to the Irish electorate in a referendum by Fianna Fáil (McDermott, 2012: 190). Articles 2 and 3 were used as a bargaining chip by the Irish government during the talks. Initially, Fianna Fáil advisors were reluctant to accept the language suggested by Irish government officials on this issue; in the end pragmatism and the nature of the negotiations led Fianna Fáil to implement the policy position on Articles 2 and 3 that was inherited on taking government. The Good Friday Agreement has been put under academic scrutiny in-depth elsewhere (Ruane & Todd, 1999; Cox *et al.*, 2006; Barton & Roche, 2009), including details of the negotiations (Mitchell, 2000; Powell, 2009). For this article it is relevant to note how the Good Friday Agreement marked a new role for the Irish government, as a joint guarantor along with the British government. The core policies for the Irish government, as outlined earlier, were achieved. First, the Irish government no longer needed to prioritise nationalist interests, as northern nationalists were fully involved in the multiparty talks and strand one transformed their position in the government and politics of Northern Ireland. Second, the security of the state was no longer threatened: the ceasefire and eventual decommissioning of weapons ensured this. Also, amendment of Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution redefined the long-term aims of unification and clarified a new policy adopted by the Irish state and ratified through a referendum by the Irish electorate. The North–South bodies, the North South Ministerial Council, the British–Irish Council and the British–Irish Parliamentary Assembly all provided continued Irish involvement in the implementation of the Agreement and in practical cross-border and intergovernmental policies.

Conclusion

There was a complex interaction of factors that determined the formation of Irish government policy throughout the conflict. The core policy as outlined earlier was consistent, and an important diplomatic and civil service process maintained a level of continuity in the implementation of this policy and avoided a derailment of these core policy ideas when party political ideology or political circumstances arose. The evolution of the Irish government policy came about through developing working intergovernmental structures and relationships and by maintaining and

widening the Irish government dialogue with northern nationalism to include republicans and to balance the focus between ‘pan-nationalism’ and intergovernmentalism. The political leadership was central to the momentum of Irish government policy evolution during the conflict and peace process, as personality politics had a strong influence on intergovernmental relations and interparty relations. Government officials were dependent on strong political leadership, and in the case of the negotiation of the Good Friday Agreement, they relied on charismatic political leadership from Bertie Ahern and Tony Blair.

Irish party politics had a definite impact on policy development, particularly due to the regular changes in governments in the early 1980s, and to the changing coalition formations throughout the 1990s. Both Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, with the help of their coalition partner, the Labour Party, introduced different policy perspectives that centred on nuanced ideological difference in relation to consent and the role of the Irish government in representing the interests of northern nationalists. Fine Gael’s intergovernmental focus and Fianna Fáil’s pan-nationalist focus were both central to the long-term stabilisation of Irish policy that ensured that the Irish government was well-prepared and well-briefed when negotiations intensified leading up to the Good Friday Agreement. John Bruton offered a partisan yet appropriate description of the role of the Irish political parties: ‘Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil sort of complement one another’. While not accepting the importance of Fianna Fáil’s principle or attitude, he nevertheless acknowledges that ‘the Fine Gael approach on its own could perhaps lead to undue standing on principle and not being able to move at all ... you needed both’.³⁰

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Notes

1. Interview with Irish official, 8 January 2009.
2. Interview with Irish official, 8 January 2009.
3. Interview with Irish official, 17 November 2008.
4. Interview with Irish official, 8 February 2008.
5. Witness seminar, 7 September 2005.
6. Interview with Irish politician, 28 November 2007.
7. Interview with Irish politician, 5 May 2009.
8. Interview with Irish politician, 13 January 2010.
9. Interview with British official, 25 July 2011.

10. Interview with Irish official, 15 December 2009. The government official explains that Garret Fitzgerald used the phrase 'dine for Ireland' the night before the Westminster parliamentary debate on the Anglo-Irish Agreement. FitzGerald is quoted as saying that 'we have sent out over the centuries, many young men to die for Ireland but you are the first whom we have sent out to dine for Ireland'. This phrase subsequently became widely quoted by the media and academics.
11. Interview with Irish official, 15 December 2009.
12. Thatcher said when asked about the report at a press conference: 'a united Ireland was one solution. That is out. A second solution was confederation of the two states. That is out. A third solution was joint authority. That is out.'
13. Interview with Irish official, 8 January 2008.
14. See Articles 2 and 5 of the Anglo-Irish Agreement.
15. For valuable discussion and analysis of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, see: Hadden and Boyle (1989); Ruane and Todd (1996); Aughey (1989); FitzGerald (1991); O'Leary and McGarry (1993).
16. Moloney (2002: 268) cites a letter Haughey received from Sinn Féin via Fr Reid detailing how they would like to establish a pan-nationalist movement.
17. Interview with British politician, 9 September 2010.
18. Witness seminar, 2 June 2008; see also De Bréadún (2008: 118).
19. Interview with British official, 25 July 2011.
20. 'We knew there was no chance of an agreement unless Dublin and London were on the same page. And that meant the Downing Street Declaration and that was what we put most of our effort into at the early stages.' Interview with British politician, 9 September 2010.
21. Joint Declaration on Peace: The Downing Street Declaration, 14 December 1993.
22. Interview with John Bruton, 4 May 2010.
23. Interview with Alan Dukes, 17 June 2010.
24. Interview with John Bruton, 4 May 2010.
25. Interview with Irish official, February 2009.
26. Interview with Irish official, 8 January 2009.
27. Interview with Irish official, 8 January 2009 and interview with Irish official, 17 November 2008.
28. 'I think the premise underlying the Framework Document was one wherein the Irish Government "represented" nationalists. My own sense is that this is too narrow and that the Irish Government had and has equal obligations to both Unionists and Nationalists, indeed to all who live on the island, what ever their declared allegiance. That approach is more inclusive and is, in pragmatic terms, more likely to lead to all Ireland reconciliation, which is my goal.' Interview with John Bruton, May 2010.
29. Interview with Irish official, 17 November 2008.
30. Interview with John Bruton, May 2010.

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